The Gambling King of Baltimore: Doc Slater 1837-1902

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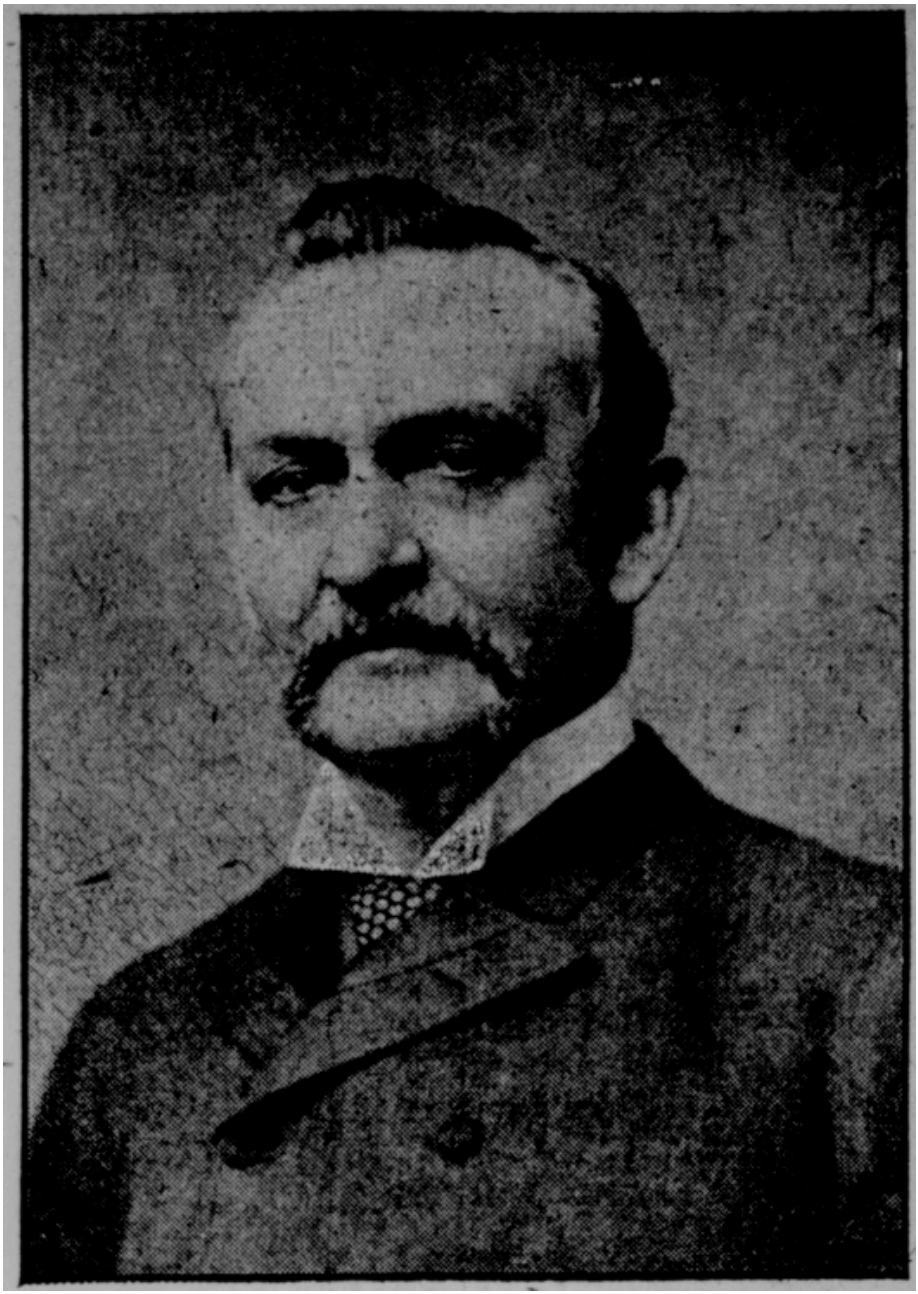
Abstract

This article examines the career of Robert J. "Doc" Slater (1836–1902), a central figure in the intersection of organized vice and municipal politics in post-Civil War Baltimore. From his origins in the violent "Plug Ugly" street gangs to his rise as the proprietor of the Maryland Gentlemen's Club, Slater exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between the Gilded Age underworld and the Democratic political machine. By leveraging the immense profits of his Faro bank to secure patronage and police protection, Slater operated as an "honest cheat"—a figure who maintained a reputation for personal integrity and community philanthropy while administering a rigged game. Drawing on contemporary newspaper accounts and court records, this narrative traces Slater's role as a financier and enforcer for the Gorman-Rasin organization, his periodic insurgencies against party leadership, and his ultimate downfall during the reform movement's "spasm of virtue" in 1895. The study argues that Slater functioned as an urban "social bandit," whose illicit wealth provided a crude social safety net that entrenched machine rule until the professionalization of city governance rendered his brand of influence obsolete.



"Doc" Slater late 1880s to early 1890s

Preface

My discovery of Robert J. "Doc" Slater was accidental. While reading a Maryland Historical Trust survey of a mansion in the Butcher's Hill neighborhood of Baltimore, I stumbled upon a curious mention of the "gambling king of Baltimore". Baltimore has a rich history of Gilded Age characters, and I was eager to learn more.

What began as curiosity soon uncovered gaps in the historical record. As I searched the Internet Archive's millions of digitized books, Slater appeared only sporadically in titles on gambling or Baltimore politics, usually as a colorful footnote. Furthermore, the sources are contradictory: was he a Robin Hood character or a tough mob boss? It was only in the contemporary newspaper accounts that the true story, such as it is, started to reveal itself. This reconstruction would have been nearly impossible without the recent digitization of historical newspapers.

This work, then, is the first modern research on Slater's life, from the slaughterhouses of Butchers Hill to the marble steps of his Calvert Street club. As an independent researcher employed at Internet Archive and with a degree in history, I have approached this project as an exercise in digital research, open-source publication, and digital preservation. By aggregating nearly one hundred primary source documents from the era—now preserved online at the Internet Archive as a 580-page resource book—a more complete and nuanced understanding of Slater emerges.

Slater's 'post' was the northeast corner of Calvert and Baltimore Street. This 1878 photograph was taken from that intersection looking westward along Baltimore Street. The northeast corner is just out of view off the right edge of the photo.

For thirty years after the Civil War, the northeast corner of Baltimore and Calvert Streets was the Hon. Robert J. "Doc" Slater's unofficial post. This was the Times Square of Baltimore near the banks and brokerage houses of German Street, and a short walk from Barnum's City Hotel, one of the best hotels in the country. He greeted judges and street sweepers alike with the same unshakeable, "imperturbable" calm.[1] To the thousands who passed him daily, he appeared as solid and clean as the white Cockeysville marble steps he leaned on.[2] As the proprietor of the Maryland Gentlemen's Club House, at 10 South Calvert Street, he ran what was considered the finest gambling establishment in Baltimore.[3][4] The name of "Doc" Slater reached sporting circles as far as New York and Chicago.[1][3] A generous benefactor to widows and orphans, he was reportedly the city's best-dressed man, a significant accolade in a town known for high-end menswear.[1][5] It was said that he carried the whole of East Baltimore in his pocket.[1] A cigar, always clenched between his teeth, was the one coarse detail in his otherwise immaculate presentation.

"Bucking the tiger" (Early life)

Slater did not start life with money. He was raised in East Baltimore among the slaughterhouses of Butchers Hill.[5] His father, John Slater, Sr., was a butcher and bacon cutter who was active in local Whig politics.[3][6] As a young man, Slater worked as his father's assistant. "When I first remember Slater he was employed as a butcher. In those days all of the sporting element used

to locate around the Marsh Market," recalled fellow political boss John J. Mahon, "he stood at the tail of a big hooded wagon".[5] During the Civil War his maternal uncle, Jacob J. Bankard, had a contract to supply meat to the Union Army from which he amassed a considerable fortune.[7][7][5] When the war ended, he built the palatial Bankard Mansion on Butcher's Hill.[8] The mansion stood out in the otherwise rough neighborhood, leading the way for what would later become a respectable area.[8] For a young man like Slater, his uncle's success and the prestigious family mansion—eventually listed on the National Register of Historic Places—must have influenced the trajectory of his ambitions.[6][8]

But following his father and uncle in the butcher's trade was not for young Robert. He soon abandoned the "cleaver and the sausage grinder for the gayer life of a rowdy," becoming a leader in a gang of Plug Uglies, the street-level enforcement arm for the city's nativist Know-Nothing party.[3][6] Herein lies the first paradox of Slater's career: that a man who would later be remembered as a devout member of St. Patrick's Catholic Church, and whose charity would endow beds in Catholic hospitals like St. Agnes, took his first steps toward power by leading a gang that ruled with "pistols, knives, brass-knuckles, and slung-shots" in the violent suppression of Catholics.[6][5] For a young man in the slaughterhouse district of Butchers Hill, the identity of the neighborhood could be a stronger pull than the influence of the church, not to mention that the Know-Nothings held the keys to employment and protection.

The gang's name, Plug Uglies, describes their tactics. Before a street battle, they would stuff their over-

sized "plug hats" with wool and leather, pulling them down over their ears like helmets.[1] Their job was to control the polls on election day, silencing the city's newest citizens by turning Baltimore's democratic process into a bloody sport.[1] The Plug Uglies were at the center of the violence that earned Baltimore its nickname, "Mobtown."[1][9] More than brief riots, they were multi-day street battles fought with pistols and bricks, where rival gangs would drag brass cannons into intersections to control polling places.[1] With each election, the ensuing violence overwhelmed the city's police force, achieving a level of national notoriety that often required the state militia to restore order.[1] In the 1856 Presidential Election, Maryland was the only state won by the Know-Nothing candidate, Millard Fillmore, largely attributed to the work of gangs like the Plug Uglies who suppressed the immigrant vote.[1]

During this period, Slater also mastered a more genteel sport, earning a reputation as Baltimore's finest tenpin bowler.[3][5] This was bowling in a world of rumbling wooden balls on polished maple. Each throw of the ball was answered not by automatic setting machines, but by a boy scrambling to reset the pins for a few cents a line. Perhaps it was in the scramble that Slater saw his own limited career path, breaking heads being a young man's game; the real power, the kind that lasted, was money.[3]

This led Slater from street enforcer to enterprise, specifically to the card game Faro bank. After discarding "the knife and steel, and his stall in the market",[6] he turned to gambling, a world where the game of Faro, often called "bucking the tiger," was far more popular than the burgeoning game of poker.[10] The game's action is

similar to roulette: a full suit of thirteen cards (usually spades) was enameled onto the table. This was the communal betting board. Players placed their chips on a card, and the dealer pulled two from a "dealing box." The first card was the banker's (house wins); the second was the player's (house pays).[10] The game's speed of play and the boisterous atmosphere generated by the rapid communal betting made "bucking the tiger" exciting indeed. In an honest game, the house edge was a mere 2%, one of the lowest in the gambling world.[10][11] This slim margin created the illusion of a fair fight against the tiger, but it also made the honest dealer vulnerable to a run of bad luck. Many houses doctored the odds. In his *Fools of Fortune*, ex-gambler John Philip Quinn detailed how this was done, including a 'sanded deck' that allowed a dealer to pull two cards as one by making them adhere to each other, while a 'tell-tale' box featured a subtle opening or mechanical flaw that allowed the banker to glimpse the next card before it was officially dealt.[10]

Slater's first venture at 10 South Calvert Street was honest enough.[3] Established around 1862 in partnership with two others, it was a small-stakes game with an open limit of just $6.25, patronized almost exclusively by the "rougher class".[3][6] Despite the low limit, it netted an incredible $40,000 in its first year. This early success persuaded him that an honest Faro bank was a foolproof enterprise, leading him to buy out his partners and expand his operations. He raised the limit to "$25 open" and began backing gambling houses in Washington, Annapolis, Philadelphia, and the resort town of Cape May, New Jersey, even sending his own agents across the coun-

try in search of players.[3][6] But Slater's luck, or the odds of an honest Faro bank, finally turned. Beginning in 1868, his "bank lost almost continually for two years".[6] Within that time, he had lost not only his own considerable investment but also $25,000 in borrowed money from friends, leaving him financially ruined.[3][6]

Facing financial ruin after two years of continuous losses, Slater approached one of his creditors for another loan, a Washington gambler named Parker.[3][6] Herbert Asbury describes Parker as an "accomplished sharper [card swindler]" and a "stern realist" who had made his own fortune running a "skinning-house" in Washington during the Civil War.[3][6] Having already loaned Slater $5,000, which was quickly lost, Parker refused to provide more funds for what he called "'squar' farrer'[square faro]".[6] He then made the counter-proposal that would define the rest of Slater's career. Parker would invest $100,000 to "fit up a stunner of a house," but only if Slater agreed to "throw the element of chance out of the window" and let Parker's man, Jim Kirby, act as the "operator"—in other words, run a crooked game.[3][6] Slater had reportedly turned down such propositions during his better days, but in his "desperate need," he "hesitated, and then yielded".[6] This secret pact between Slater, Parker, and Kirby led to the creation of the Maryland Gentlemen's Club House.[3][6] From this point forward, Slater's life was a performance to conceal a crooked scheme.

And so the central conflict of Robert J. Slater's career was set. As noted by contemporary John O'Connor, the Maryland Gentlemen's Club House was a "de luxe skinning-den" from its opening night.[6] Yet, it contrasts with Doc Slater the honest benefactor, as noted

in his *Baltimore Sun* obituary, which insisted that his "most striking characteristics" were "his generosity and his absolute integrity in financial matters," adding that in all his affairs there was "never a whisper or a suspicion of anything that was not perfectly straight".[5] Another obituary echoed this, stating, "Despite his calling Slater was noted for his integrity".[12] To understand this performance, one must first enter the "stunner of a house" on South Calvert Street.

Slater's Club House is partially visible as the 3-story red brick building on the far right edge. South Calvert Street looking south, intersected by German Street (now E. Redwood St), 1868.

”It shines out among all” (Maryland Gentlemen's Club House)

Step inside, if you are known to the house. You must first pass the inspection of a doorman, a ”colored servant” in formal evening dress who peers through a “small oval glass” in a “massive door of solid walnut.” This man, despite the title of ”servant,” controls access to this exclusive domain. He knows every face that mattered. Only if you are a recognized patron or give “evidence of being a bona-fide customer” will the door swing inward.[6]

Once across the threshold, you find yourself in a gorgeous vestibule. The light from a “large bell-shaped chandelier lined with silver” illuminates “oak-paneled walls in etchings of gold, and a lofty ceiling frescoed with groups of sporting naiads”—a classical mythology display of nude females under the respectable guise of high art. A second, inner hall has a “velvet carpet, thick enough to stifle the heaviest foot-fall,” leading you toward a winding flight of stairs. As you ascend, you pass a bronze statue of Don Cæsar de Bazan , standing half life-size in a niche, a silent sentinel guarding the mysteries above. He is the swashbuckling count invented by the French novelist Victor Hugo, a master swordsman who gambled away a fortune but kept his honor. He often saved the weak from corrupt officials. His presence here is a carefully placed symbol, assuaging guests of moral discomforts; it says 'We may be breaking the law, but we are gentlemen of honor.'[6][3]

The stairway leads you into the main saloon, a room sixty feet long and thirty wide along the front side of

the building. Your feet sink into a "seamless dark blue velvet carpet, like that in the east room of the White House." A carpet of this size without seams was an expensive extravagance, and its thickness quiets the discreet murmur of high-stakes negotiations. The room is filled with furniture of the "most massive description," crafted from walnut and rosewood. To your right, a towering rosewood étagère (open-shelved bookcase) holds bronze statues of Richard the Lionheart and Philip II of France, great rivals of the Third Crusade, now facing each other. Between them stands a famous equine bronze, Pierre-Jules Mêne's L'Accolade , which depicts an Arab stallion nuzzling a mare, her neck lowered as she turns away. High civilization facing natural lust; intellect versus risk. To your left, a sideboard carries cut-glass decanters filled with wines and liquors for the "gratuitous use of the visitors." There are also magnificent silver punch bowls that allowed patrons to drink for long periods without becoming too inebriated. One, a Tiffany, is adorned with "grotesque Bachanelian faces and elfish figures," a tribute to the god of wine. Another, an old English Copeland luster punch bowl "wreathed with the vine and fruit of the grape" . The luster shimmers in the gaslight like liquid gold. Parian marble mantels and French plate glass mirrors reflect the dazzling effect, including one framed in "exquisitely carved ivory" that once belonged to a Russian Minister to the United States. Behind the faro tables hang two pictures attributed (likely falsely) to Rubens, "representing Sunrise and Sunset at Sea". In one corner, a large bookcase holds an "artistic check-book" for those whose cash has run dry. There are also hidden drawers "used to keep

'collateral'"—the watches, diamond stickpins, and stock certificates surrendered by players in exchange for the club's high-interest credit.[6][13]

Here stand the gaming tables, two for faro and one for roulette. Their appointments, from ivory chips to dealing-boxes, are of the finest quality. In this room, during the club's better days, the limit was taken off. Men like the Lorillards—the proprietors of the great tobacco company—and the Belmonts, titans of finance and thoroughbred racing, played here, where the turn of a single card could mean the transfer of "from $15,000 to $25,000 every few minutes." It was a place for "high-rolling," where the house was "always willing to make the ceiling the limit," and a $1,000 bet on a single turn was not uncommon.[6][14]

You next pass through folding doors of stained boxwood veneer, its hard, dense grain inlaid with intricate carvings of hunting scenes. You enter the dining hall, where an immense T-shaped table of black walnut is supported by carved dragon-legs. In the center rests an "enormous silver ice-holder" with sides of solid silver and an "embossed net-work of branches and fruits in virgin gold." The dinner service is of solid silver lined with gold, including two pitchers, each two feet high, crafted in Geneva. The glassware is stamped with the initial "S."[6]

Continuing up the stairs, seven smaller chambers await, three used as private club rooms with furniture of the "richest possible description." The other rooms are bedchambers, complete with imported beds that cost five hundred dollars. Each room has its own attached bathroom with hot and cold water, a rare indulgence for the

era. These are for the convenience of players who, from "too free libations of champagne, are disinclined to walk home," or who wish to catch an early morning train.[6]

Slater presided over his club with an unassuming demeanor and impeccable, though never flashy, dress.[3][5] Like the symbolism of the club's decor his dress was also carefully considered. Earlier generations of "sporting men" had favored flashy outfits, but the post-Civil War era developed a more refined aesthetic.[15] As Baltimore's "preeminent sport," Slater adopted a "fashionable but subdued cut and style" that allowed him to blend with the bankers and politicians he courted.[15] A plain black suit, a gold watch chain, and a silk top hat kept in such a state of "shiny" perfection that a local paper remarked the classic motto *micat inter omnes* ("it shines out among all") could be "truthfully applied to it".[16][17] This was completed with "bright" patent leather shoes.[18] Yet, specific details signaled his trade to those in the know. A "large diamond" stickpin in his shirt front and a "magnificent solitaire" ring on his finger served as the requisite badges of a successful gambler who was wealthy enough to pay out, but disciplined enough to avoid the gaudy excess of the common swindler.[18]

Isaac Freeman Rasin, 1879

"Trick and subterfuges" (1860s-1870s)

By the late 1860s, Robert J. "Doc" Slater was a fixture of Baltimore's underworld. His gambling house at No. 10 South Calvert Street had become a hub of wealth and influential patrons.[3][6] But while Slater stacked his fortune, the electorate shifted. During and immediately after the Civil War, Maryland's Unionist government had disenfranchised former Confederate sympathizers, effectively excluding the state's majority Democratic party from power. This ended after the ratification of the Maryland Constitution of 1867, which restored voting rights to these citizens. In the municipal elections of 1868, the newly re-enfranchised Democrats swept into office. It was the beginning of a decades-long period of Democratic rule in Baltimore. Slater saw the opportunity and began to transform his financial and social capital into political power.[5]

The Democratic-Conservative party that swept into power was a new political entity that emerged after four years of Union military occupation, which had dismantled the state's old-guard leadership with its deep-seated Southern sympathies.[19] For these "Redeemer" Democrats, taking control of Baltimore was a crusade to restore the pre-war social order and dismantle the influence of Radical Republicans. Their platform was built on opposition to federal Reconstruction efforts and the empowerment of African Americans. The party's leaders and their followers viewed control of the city government as a means to enforce their vision of society and to reward those who had remained loyal to the cause.

Slater fit the mold. As a former leader of the "Plug

Uglies," he spoke the language of force.[6] He also brought exactly what the new Democratic machine needed: a loyal following, organizational muscle, and ready cash. In the 1868 mayoral election, Slater threw everything behind the Democratic candidate, Robert T. Banks. His ability to mobilize "ward rounders" to deliver the city's rougher districts proved decisive.[20] His obituary later noted that he "really obtained his initial hold under Mayor Banks, whose great friend he was and who rewarded his efforts on his behalf with a large share of the patronage of his office."[5]

Slater personally had no use for a salaried position in the Mayor's office. He wanted that "large share of the city's patronage".[21][5] This was the currency of the city, enabling him to hand out municipal jobs—police badges, clerkships, and labor contracts. These workers were technically paid by the city, but they remained loyal to the "boss", to whom they owed their livelihood. It bought insurance for his illegal games eg. a quiet word to the police commissioners, and the raids stopped.[22] And it gave him influence with city work contracts, which he could steer toward allies who knew how to return the favor with "benevolences," or kickbacks.[23]

The system fed itself. The gambling house, now protected by the very officials sworn to uphold the law, generated immense profits that funded his political operations. In turn, his political power, fueled by patronage, ensured the gambling house could flourish without interference.[22] By 1870, this symbiosis led to the opening of the "Maryland Gentlemen's Club House" on Calvert Street. The lavish affair was attended by a who's who of the new Democratic establishment, includ-

ing "members of the State Legislature, Judges of the higher Courts, and a score or so of representatives of the city government".[6] Slater had successfully transformed his gambling club into a political headquarters.[21]

However, this comfortable position was challenged by another Democratic boss, I. Freeman Rasin. He was a professional politician who sought control over the party in the city, and who was also allied with Senator Arthur P. Gorman at the state level.[1] During the mayoral election of 1871, Slater remained loyal to his benefactor, supporting the incumbent Mayor Robert Banks for reelection, while Rasin put forward his own candidate, Joshua Vansant.[24] The election resulted in Vansant unseating Mayor Banks. This was a severe blow to Slater. Overnight, he lost privileged access to the mayor's office and, more importantly, his control over the distribution of city patronage.[24] This loss fundamentally altered his political trajectory, transforming him from a favored insider to an often rebellious outsider within his own party. An insurgent within an insurgency.

While Slater battled for political relevance, his club operated with open disregard for the law, making him a target of his natural enemies the city's burgeoning reform movement. Throughout the early 1870s, he treated legal penalties as little more than a cost of doing business. A summary of his record shows he was indicted fourteen times for keeping a gambling house between 1868 and 1877.[25] His typical strategy was to plead guilty, pay a fine, and resume operations. In December 1872, for instance, he was one of several proprietors fined $500 by Judge Gilmor, while other cases against him were simply suspended.[26] When fines seemed inconvenient, he

employed legal maneuvers to evade Baltimore justice altogether, successfully having four cases removed to other counties where a conviction was less likely.[25]

A more personal and persistent threat came from his own clientele, who sought to use the courts to reclaim their losses. However, suing a gambling house proprietor was legally difficult. Maryland's law stated that "no person shall recover any money or other thing which he may have won by betting at any game, or by betting in any manner whatsoever".[27] This clause created a formidable legal shield and forced aggrieved gamblers to devise legal loopholes. In one of the earliest documented cases in 1868, Robert K. Wilson sued Slater for $6,900. To circumvent the prohibition, Wilson testified that he had gambled away not only his own money but also several thousand dollars he held in trust for third parties—in this case, former slave owners. This framed the lawsuit not as a gambler seeking to recover his own losses, but as a fiduciary recovering stolen funds on behalf of others.[27] Another suit was filed by James W. Kyle in 1876. The action was brought "for the use of Leila S. Kyle, his wife," arguing that the approximately $3,000 Kyle lost at Slater's faro and roulette tables was not his own to lose, but belonged to his wife. Kyle then kept moving the venue to surrounding rural counties where jurors were more sympathetic to the victims of urban vice. A court in Carroll County eventually accepted Mr. Kyle's argument, and in January 1877, a jury awarded the full $3,000 to Mrs. Kyle.[28][29] These lawsuits, though difficult to win, were a constant threat. Slater's profits were never entirely safe from the patrons he fleeced.

By 1874, the moral opposition to Slater's enterprise

had become organized and vocal. During a meeting of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) they fiercely debated whether to accept a $20 donation from him. Opponents of accepting the money argued that it was torn from "misguided men in the midnight hour" and came "accompanied with the tears of women, who are worse than widows, and children, who are worse than orphans." They refused to allow "blood stains on our garments" by compromising with a man they equated to a thief.[30] The press amplified this sentiment, with one newspaper labeling Slater a "vampire" and a key member of the state's corrupt political "ring".[31]

The growing public pressure began to influence a judiciary empowered by a recent change in state law. For years, politically connected defendants like Slater had exploited a legal loophole known as the "right of removal," which allowed them to have their cases transferred to other counties on the claim that they could not receive a fair trial in Baltimore.[25] This often resulted in acquittals or dropped charges in jurisdictions less concerned with urban vice. However, a recent constitutional amendment restricted this "indiscriminate removal of cases," giving Baltimore judges the teeth they needed to enforce the law.[25] This judicial spine-stiffening was likely accelerated by the infamous municipal election of November 1875. In that contest, the Gorman-Rasin machine secured power through such brazen fraud and violence that the city was left in a state of outrage, particularly towards the police who failed to maintain order.[32] With the machine momentarily on the defensive and needing to feign respectability, political protection for operators like Slater was untenable. Consequently, in

December 1875, Judge Gilmor seized on his new powers. When Slater and several other gambling proprietors pleaded guilty, Gilmor imposed the maximum fine of $500 and issued a direct public warning: if heavy fines proved "inefficacious, imprisonment will be resorted to, even to the extent of the law."[33] Despite these local battles, Slater's defiance continued. Five months later, in May 1876, the grand jury indicted him once again. The stage was set for a dramatic confrontation.[34]

Slater pleaded guilty again, expecting another scanty fine. On March 1, 1877, Slater stood for sentencing in the Criminal Court alongside a half-dozen other indicted gambling-house keepers. The others, including Slater's own partner, Francis Dardin, received fines as expected. Judge George William Brown explained his leniency toward them by noting they had not resorted to "trick and subterfuges" and had promised to abandon the business. But for Slater, addressing him directly, Judge Brown said he was an "old offender against this law" who had been previously "warned not to continue in the violation of the law." The judge then sentenced Slater—and Slater alone—to five months in the Baltimore City Jail. Slater, elegantly dressed but looking frail, "seemed to be considerably distressed." Immediately, his powerful allies mobilized. A "strong pressure was brought on Judge Brown" by "a number of citizens of influence" who visited his private chambers, but the judge "showed not the slightest disposition to change his judgment." Slater was taken to City Jail.[16]

On March 9, Judge Brown issued a written opinion, dismantling the case for leniency. He publicly detailed Slater's record of fourteen separate indictments

for the same offense since 1868, including four dodged via the now-restricted removal process. Brown declared that jailing poor men for running a lottery, while fining rich men for running a faro operation, was a disgrace. "Nothing brings the administration of the law so much into disrepute," he wrote, "as the failure to administer equal justice to high and low, rich and poor." With the judicial path blocked, Slater's allies focused their efforts on Governor John Lee Carroll, who was in Slater's debt. As one contemporary newspaper noted, Slater had been the "chief instrument of nominating" Governor Carroll. Slater, the paper predicted, was "too useful a politician and wire-worker to lose or fail in accommodating with so precious a boon as liberty."[35]

After fifty-six days in jail, the political pressure gave way. On April 26, 1877, Governor Carroll issued a full pardon. The official justification was Slater's precarious "health", with the document citing certificates from two prominent doctors who attested that "unless Slater has a change of climate he will be attacked by an incurable disease and will die in jail." The pardon also noted that Slater had given the Governor "assurances that he will not engage again in the business for which he was imprisoned"—a promise he would quickly break. The pretense of his failing health was immediately exposed when Slater "was seen on the streets after his release," looking no worse for wear.[36]

George William Brown, 1880

”Three clowns” (1880s)

The ongoing rivalry between Baltimore's Democratic factions broke out into kinetic warfare in the spring of 1880. The flashpoint was a new anti-gambling bill introduced in the state legislature at Annapolis. The proposed law sought to make keeping a gambling house punishable by ”long imprisonment”.[20] Contemporary reports made it clear that the bill was ”aimed directly at Doc. Slater” by the dominant wing of the party, controlled by I. Freeman Rasin.[20]

Slater dispatched his own ”gang of Doc. Slater's strikers” and ”ward rounders” to Annapolis, not to lobby, but to intimidate and, if necessary, fight to defeat the bill.[37][20] Rasin and his legislative allies, Senators Bians and Cooper, were hounded through the streets by armed men, and a plot to assassinate them was uncovered.[20][37] The tension turned to actual bloodshed when the two factions met on Main Street. A quarrel escalated into a brawl, culminating when one of Slater's men, Patrick Kernan, shot a Rasin supporter, Michael Farrell, in the face.[20]

Late the same year, Slater's father, John Slater, Sr., died.[38] Now 43 years old, assailed from all sides, facing an increasingly dangerous situation within his own party, and mourning the death of his father, Slater was at a crisis point personally and professionally. He needed to consolidate his power. He deepened an alliance with J. Frank Morrison, a fellow boss who commanded significant influence in West Baltimore. Morrison was a rising technocrat who had recently been appointed Warden of the City Jail, and who would soon bring electric lights

to Baltimore streets and found the influential Crescent Democratic Club.[9]

In the Gorman-Rasin machine, Slater and Morrison were the muscle and the nerve. Slater, the former 'Plug Ugly', provided the muscle with his army of 'ward rounders,' repeaters, and toughs. Morrison was the nerve. He controlled the police telegraph system, giving him the power to selectively throttle information and delay police responses to election-day violence. Their partnership perfected the art of 'colonization,' where Slater dispatched his transient drifters to swell the voter rolls in Morrison's contested wards. It was a seamless trade: Slater provided the 'flying squadrons' to steal the vote, and Morrison ensured the alarms didn't ring until the victory was secured.

By 1882, Slater and Morrison entered an uneasy truce with Rasin, creating a ruling 'triumvirate' dedicated to crushing the Republican opposition.[39] But when it came to dividing the spoils of victory, city jobs, the truce often crumbled. In the Democratic primaries of October 1883, the Morrison-Slater faction openly challenged Rasin's authority. The fight was fiercest for the Superior Court clerkship, where the Morrison-Slater faction backed W. J. Cummings against Rasin's candidate, James Bond. The election was a "monstrous saturnalia of fraud," with "Ruffianism reign[ing] supreme, and repeating and ballot-box stuffing was the order of the day." In the end, Rasin's control of the party machinery proved decisive, and his man won the prize.[40]

The defeat in 1883 pushed Slater toward a new strategy. In a remarkable interview in May 1884, the man who was the very definition of a political boss adopted

the language of a reformer, offering a rare window into his mindset. "This faction fight is an outrage, because it is unnecessary," he declared. "I know that the people are tired of bosses... Are we to stand up before the public like three clowns every year, while the democratic party is being destroyed by the opprobrium these factions bring upon it? I am tired of that sort of thing, and I will do my best to bring about a change. I want to see the masses drive this bossism out of the party and take affairs into their own hands." Whether this was a sincere conviction or a shrewd political calculation to build a broader coalition against Rasin, it was public admission that his fight was one of "self-preservation" against a machine that sought to destroy him.[41] Despite these local battles, Slater's stature within the national party remained undiminished. Just two months later, in July 1884, he served as a delegate from Maryland's third congressional district to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.[24][4]

The stability of Baltimore's Democratic Machine, which relied on a balance of power, began to fray in 1885. Robert "Doc" Slater, long a cornerstone of the establishment party, emerged as the most formidable opponent to the machine's *primus inter pares* ("first among equals"), Isaac Freeman Rasin. Both men saw the other as an existential threat: Rasin thought he must put Slater "out of business", or Slater would "crush" him.[24] Slater made an audacious move. He aligned himself with a Democratic independence movement, the so-called Fusion ticket.[24] This ad-hoc party was an alliance of Sorehead Democrats ("disaffected party members"), idealistic Reformers, and Republicans who sought to bypass

the rigged party primaries by running a joint slate of candidates. The Fusion movement was primarily supported by the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad.[24] For decades, the B&O had been a dominant political force, but was now in a struggle with Rasin and his state-level ally, Senator Gorman. To the B&O, the Fusion ticket was a way to install a reform-minded administration that would break Rasin and Gorman's ability to tax and regulate them at will.

The move required a gut check for Slater, who initially balked.[24] It meant backing the Fusion mayoral candidate, Judge George William Brown. Brown was not only a "Silk-stocking" high-minded reformer, but in 1877 the same Brown sentenced Slater to five months in the city jail.[16][36] Despite Slater's previous run-in with Brown, and possibly calculating the enemy of your enemy is your friend, Slater conceded and went along with his B&O allies in supporting the judge as the Fusion candidate.[24] Rasin's opposing candidate was James Hodges, a respected and prosperous merchant who represented the "Regular" Democratic establishment. While Hodges was a man of personal integrity, he was generally viewed as a top-hatted ("upper-class") puppet for Rasin - which in fact he became.[24]

The contest for mayor was the "fiercest municipal election ever fought in Baltimore", wrote Kent.[24] While Judge Brown provided a moral element to the campaign, the real conflict was between the corporate influence of the B&O Railroad and the entrenched patronage system Rasin represented. The campaign was directed from each of the bosses' respective headquarters: Rasin's Calumet Club, the center of the old-guard patronage system; and

Slater's luxury gambling club, that stood against the Gorman-Rasin machine.[9] There was also the third boss, J. Frank Morrison, who built the Crescent Club.[9] Morrison initially backed the Fusion party with Slater, but midway through the campaign, sensing which way the wind blows, switched back to Rasin.[24] From these three clubs, the schism became a contest for the mayor's office. Both were technically vying for the Democratic seat of the ticket, with the winner a shoo-in to sweep the general election.

It was the largest turnout for a municipal election in Baltimore history.[42] Election Day was deceptively quiet, with no reports of the street warfare that had defined the Plug Ugly era. At the end of the day Rasin's man Hodges won in a narrow result.[42] A few days later, the Brown camp released an open letter in the *Baltimore Sun* criticizing "the way in which the returns were obtained". For example, in the 8th Precinct of the 4th Ward, the voter rolls listed 115 more names than the police had confirmed residing there. Prominent citizens, such as the artist Emil Kett, arrived at the polls only to find their votes had already been cast. The fraud was open: an election judge named Blondhine in the 10th Ward was observed with his pockets stuffed with folded ballots. Another judge, William Dearing, was on record boasting of his intent to stuff the boxes. The letter calculated that these known fraudulent votes were alone enough to have stolen the victory from Brown.[43] Slater, the professional cheat, was outdone.

The 1885 election was a crushing political defeat for Slater. The immediate aftermath was swift: the victorious boss purged City Hall, sweeping Slater's and

the duplicitous Morrison's loyalists from the patronage payrolls.[24] The losses continued in the October 1886 municipal elections, where all of Slater's candidates were "snowed under."[44] Yet, even in defeat, real sources of power remained. His gambling house at 10 South Calvert Street continued to operate under a unique form of political protection, untouched by police raids that conveniently targeted his rivals.[22] Rasin still needed Slater's help to defeat Republicans. And Slater remained a man of substantial wealth, with real estate holdings assessed at nearly $23,000 in 1887.[45][21] Stripped of his official patronage, Slater was a general without an army, but he still possessed the reputation and the war chest to remain a formidable player in the ongoing political conflict.

For the remainder of the decade, Slater operated as a pragmatic and unpredictable insurgent. He continued to challenge Rasin in the primaries, though with little success, winning only two wards in the legislative contests of 1887.[46] His enduring influence, however, meant he could not be ignored. In September 1887, he was a key participant in a tense summit with ex-Governor Whyte and J. Frank Morrison—and possibly Rasin himself—in an effort to "harmonize" the party's warring factions.[47] His allegiances were fluid and driven by self-interest. After that year's reform movement faltered, it was widely alleged that Slater and Morrison had cut a last-minute deal with Rasin, betraying the reformers in exchange for a promised share of patronage.[48] His value extended beyond Baltimore's factional wars. In 1888, the national Democratic party dispatched him to New York as one of the "Democratic Desperadoes" tasked with influencing

the presidential election.[49]

By the end of the 1880s, Slater had settled back into his role as the chief antagonist to the Rasin machine. In October 1889, his political organization, the "Young Men's Democratic Club," formally declared its support for the anti-ring "fusion ticket," signaling his renewed commitment to defeating the regular organization by any means necessary.[50] While this political war raged, the legal and financial pressures of his primary business never ceased. In December 1890, he was hit with a significant lawsuit from a patron seeking to recover over $5,000 in losses, a reminder that political rivals were not his only adversaries.[51] Yet, as the city entered the 1890s, Slater's position, though diminished from its peak, seemed secure. Despite years of electoral defeats and factional battles, his "swell gaming establishment" continued to flourish openly, a testament to a political "pull" so strong that it had survived even the most determined efforts of his enemies to break it.[52]

"Spasm of virtue" (1890s)

In early 1893, shortly after Democrat Grover Cleveland entered the White House, the economy collapsed, triggering one of the nation's worst depressions. With unemployment soaring and businesses failing, voters had no patience for the incumbent party. Retribution came in the 1894 midterms, when a Republican landslide buried the Democrats.

In Baltimore, this national mood was what the press called a "spasm of virtue."[53] For many people, the machine's

graft was no longer a nuisance, but intolerable. Reformers like Charles J. Bonaparte launched a public assault on the "Supreme Boss" system, naming Slater, Morrison, and Rasin as the ringleaders.[23]

Politically protected gambling was an easy target for the public's wrath. By late 1894, a Grand Jury launched an inquiry into the gambling houses of Baltimore. The ward bosses decided the police would have to withdraw all protection, at least for the time being. "It is becoming too hot for us," one boss admitted to the press. "The people are holding us responsible for all the gambling that is going on in Baltimore, and the police must act without partiality from now on. All sorts of gambling will have to be stopped for the present."[54] *The Herald and Torch Light* noted that in the past, Slater had "often escaped indictment" by "placing judicious loans in high places." These funds were "seldom returned," turning the unpaid debts—effectively bribes—into life insurance for himself and his club.[17] However, the paper observed that the new judges on the bench were "gentlemen who do not borrow money," signaling the old arrangements no longer worked.[17]

Facing this new reality, Slater's political allies warned him that his "protectors have lost their power to protect."[17] Police detectives were stationed near the doors of the club, taking note of the comings and goings. The bosses advised Slater that the police could not stop the Grand Jury.[53] On Tuesday, December 18, 1894, Slater "discharged the waiters, dealers and other employees" and locked the doors of 10 South Calvert Street.[18]

In the days following the club's closure, Slater was seen lingering in the lobby of the Carrollton Hotel, hold-

ing "solemn talks" with Col. Eugene Higgins—Slater's direct conduit to Senator Gorman—and "other well-known men about town."[18] Witnesses said he maintained his "accustomed splendor of personal appearance": his patent leathers were "bright," a "large diamond" stickpin sat in his shirt front, and a "magnificent solitaire" glittered on his finger.[18] Yet, the "kindly, good-natured face of the Doctor looked worried and worn."[18] He held "frequent consultations with certain prominent Baltimore politicians," wearing a "sad and dejected look as he walked the streets."[18] The "Honest Cheat" had played his final hand. Years later, the journalist H. L. Mencken, a connoisseur of Baltimore's glorious decay, would write with nostalgia for the end of "the old-time, so-called first-class gambling houses of the sort kept by the Hon. Doc Slater."[55]

The machine that had sheltered Slater was now fighting for its own survival. One year later, the November 1895 municipal election became a referendum on its rule. In a final show of force, the Gorman-Rasin faction staged a torchlight procession through the streets of downtown Baltimore. Slater was there marching beside Rasin. The *Baltimore Sun* mercilessly mocked the parade, noting that as the marchers passed, a bell tolled dolefully at the head of the column.[56] The procession was padded with "out-of-town men" imported from as far as Westminster and Annapolis, while many local marchers were city employees who admitted they were only there because they were "afraid of losing my job."[56] Even their props were dusty relics: the transparencies—candle-lit linen boxes carried on poles—had been pulled from deep storage. Some still protested the 'Tilden steal' of 1876,

while another featured a racist caricature and the slogan 'No Mixed Schools for Us' that was unconvincingly carried by a hired black man.[56] An observer quoted by the *Sun* captured the mood: "It looks to me like a funeral procession." His companion added, "And the bells tolled."[56]

The parade's hollow theatrics failed to sway the public, so the machine reverted to its blunt instruments. On election day, "rowdyism was rampant," particularly in the Seventeenth Ward, a Democratic stronghold. Voters were "knocked down and beaten". Black voters were systematically intimidated, and Reform League watchers were assaulted while police officers stood by, "unable or unwilling to prevent it."[57] But this time, the old tricks failed. The election proved a historic catastrophe for the Gorman-Rasin Democrats. For the first time since the end of Reconstruction, the party lost control of the state as Republican Lloyd Lowndes won the governorship and Alcaeus Hooper became mayor of Baltimore. The new administration immediately seized control of state patronage, most critically appointing a new Board of Police Commissioners. This single act severed the machine's direct command over the force that had protected allies like Slater and harassed his opponents. The "spasm of virtue" that had closed Slater's club was now the official policy of the state.

Slater's Ocean Club at Long Branch, New Jersey was one of the main gambling clubs there before all were shut down in 1901 (postcard shows the later Tory's Restaurant c. 1920s)

”I am too old a man to take chances” (Final years)

The closure of 10 South Calvert Street marked the end of Slater's public power, but not his notoriety. For a few more years, he operated his summer resort, the Ocean Club at Long Branch, New Jersey, until a renewed anti-gambling crusade there forced its permanent closure around 1901. ”I am too old a man to take chances of spending time behind prison bars,” he told the press, signaling his final retirement from the game.[58] His personal life remained exemplary; sources described him as a devout Catholic who abstained from both alcohol and profanity.[3][5] However, the master operator of the crooked Faro bank was himself a sucker for another game. He squandered the bulk of his fortune at the racetrack, and his final years were spent in ”rather close quarters financially.”[5] He died on May 3, 1902, from what was described as ”nervous prostration and general debility superinduced by a tumor in the throat.”[59] The cigar, a fixture of his identity, was his final undoing.

His death triggered a scramble that exposed both the remnants of his wealth and the reality of his decline. When his widow, Sarah E. Slater, attempted to auction the contents of their home without an administrator, creditors forced her into Orphans' Court to settle his debts. There it was revealed that he had died without a will and owed money for the very furniture being sold.[60] The sale at his home at 1709 East Baltimore Street drew a ”ravenous” crowd, mostly women, who ”jostled and pushed each other about the hallways and

rooms and quarreled to get advantageous positions."[61] The scene descended into chaos; several women fainted in the crush, including one portly lady who, during an attempt to pass her out a window, became "securely wedged, with one foot inside and one outside."[61] Despite the pandemonium, his possessions—Royal Sevres plates that sold for $20 each, a Tiffany table service, and rare bronzes—fetched high prices.[13][61] The contents of his clubs at Calvert Street and Long Branch were similarly liquidated, dismantling the remaining vestiges of his plush life.[62]

The dispersal of Slater's fortune produced two starkly different legacies. A decade after his death, the will of his widow created a sensation when it bequeathed $10,000 to her niece, Sarah E. Schirmer, and $200 to her late husband's sister-in-law, Margaret White. A reporter found Mrs. White at her job as a charwoman in the Courthouse, "bucket in hand." Upon hearing the news, she declared, "I won't work any more."[63] In stark contrast was the fate of Slater's favorite nephew, Gustavus "Gus" Slater who had been lavished with money by his uncle during his lifetime and inherited $25,000.[64] Gus, long a trouble maker who was once indicted for murder, squandered his inheritance at the racetrack, and descending into alcoholism and poverty. Stripped of his fine clothes and high-society friends, he was arrested for living on the streets and committed to the Bayview Asylum.[65] He died alone and destitute in a cheap hotel in 1910, a "broken-down sport" consumed by the world his uncle had mastered.[64]

Slater's death earned a prominent obituary in the *Baltimore Sun*, filled with glowing tributes from across

the social spectrum.[5] Two years later, the Great Baltimore Fire incinerated what was left of his club, destroying what had been Baltimore's premier gambling house. The marble, the rosewood, and the secret drawers were gone.[3] All that remained was his name and reputation. Slater held two unofficial titles that, like his dress, played on class and profession. The "Honorable," typically reserved for judges and politicians, was a signal of street credibility. The "Doc" moniker was often used by gamblers of the era who sought to establish an aura of expertise. Perhaps Slater saw his own reflection in Don Cæsar, the bronze statue that greeted visitors to his club: a noble outlaw who regarded paying debts and keeping one's word as the highest virtues. In this worldview, the "corrupt officials" were not the machine bosses dealing in kickbacks, but the hypocritical Reformers who condemned the game, and the police who took bribes but refused to stay bought. To him, the "weak" were the widows, the orphans, and the unemployed immigrants in the wards who relied on the machine for coal in the winter.

The Hon. Doc Slater lived as what historian Eric Hobsbawm termed a 'social bandit', a figure who operates outside the law but remains embedded within the community by providing a system of welfare.[66] He was a product of the slaughterhouse district who had successfully moved past the violence of the Know-Nothing era. Yet to the 'Silk-stocking' reformers, he was a predatory tiger whose Faro game bled the citizens and perpetuated a non-democratic system of governance.[10] However, to his supporters in the wards, he was a neighborhood boy who had beaten a rigged system. By funneling rivers

of illicit profits into hospital beds and providing weekly pensions, Slater roped the community into his own survival. Ultimately, he demonstrated a cynical but fundamental truth of politics: a community will forgive a cheat, so long as he is *their* cheat.

Baltimore Fire aftermath (street unknown), 1904

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